

uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park

New prospects in South Africa's Drakensberg Mountains

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South Africa's political isolation from the international community during the 'apartheid era' meant that it did not become a signatory to the World Heritage Convention until as recently as 1997. But it has moved fast to catch up, and is now the proud custodian of no fewer than eight World Heritage sites – three natural, four cultural and one mixed.

The uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park became a World Heritage site in 2000 and is one of only two sites in Africa designated under both natural and cultural criteria, the other being the Cliff of Bandiagara (Land of the Dogons), in Mali. The park protects much of the steep escarpment of southern Africa's most dramatic mountain range, and

the wealth of San rock art painted on the walls of about 600 natural sandstone caves along its length. Its highest reaches are lands of jagged peaks and massive walls of basaltic rock, while lower down a thick layer of golden sandstone creates overhanging cliffs, piercing the grassy slopes and leaving massive fallen boulders in the valleys below. It is a hikers' paradise, in which the crisp mountain air, dramatic vistas and solitude are sure to set the spirit free. And its status as a World Heritage site is bringing enormous benefits to the people of South Africa, economically, socially and politically.

The park covers an area of 2,428 km² along South Africa's international border with the 'mountain kingdom' of Lesotho. Its western boundary – at about 3,000 m

– marks the watershed between the great river basins of South Africa. From here, the land drops steeply through a complex of deeply incised valleys to the park's eastern boundary about 20 km away and 1,500 m below. The vegetation varies with altitude and aspect, with alpine-tundra communities of heath-like plants near the summits; extensive fire-maintained grasslands on spurs and plateaux at mid-altitudes, and a variety of other plant communities including montane forests and Protea woodlands lower down. The long harsh winter – during which the summits are often covered in snow – creates conditions that are not especially favourable to larger mammals, but herds of eland and several other species of antelope inhabit the lower altitudes.



The spectacular natural beauty of uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park attracts an increasing number of tourists. The site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2000

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Stone Age

There is evidence of human presence in the area from the early and middle Stone Ages, but the San hunter-gathering communities are only known to have lived here for the past 8,000 years. It was the San people who created the wealth of rock art still seen throughout the park, mostly during a period of about 4,000 years up until their disappearance early last century. The gradual demise of the San was brought about by the arrival of new immigrants, the first black farmers migrating into the area from the north about 400 years ago, followed by the Zulu-speaking people, British and Dutch in the first half of the nineteenth century.

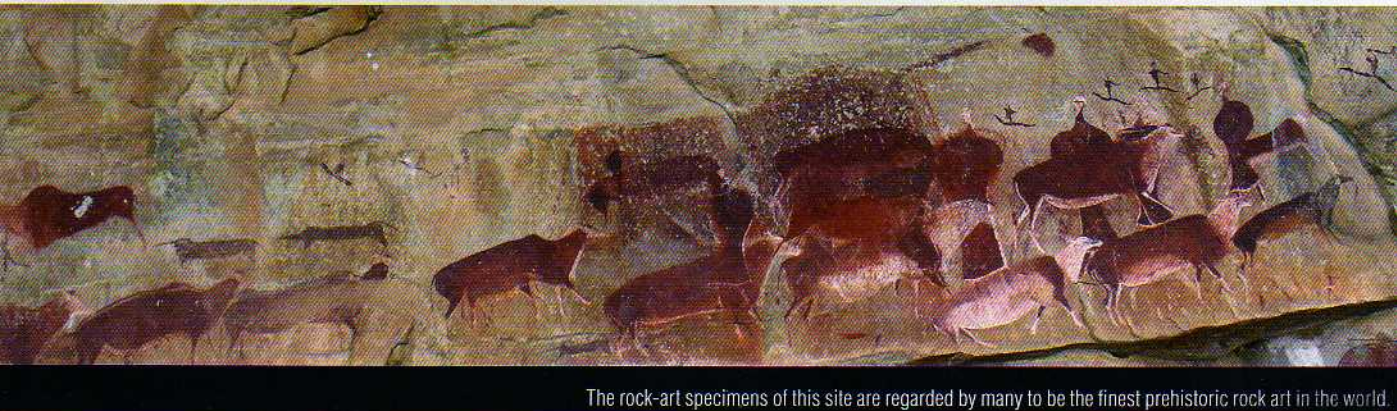
The British colonial government realized that there was a need to protect the forests and water catchment areas of the Drakensberg and maintain the upper slopes as unoccupied state land. Thus, they created a number of protected areas under various statutes over a period of about fifty years from the early 1900s.

The present park represents the consolidation of twelve (mostly contiguous) protected areas, now managed by a single agency, Ezemvelo-KwaZulu Natal Wildlife (EKZN Wildlife). About half the area of the present park was proclaimed as Wilderness Areas in 1973, and the whole park became a Ramsar site in 1996 in recognition of its value as an internationally important wet-

land with its abundance and complexity of high-altitude tarns, springs, bogs, marshes and streams.

Plants, birds and paintings

The outstanding universal value that qualifies the site for World Heritage status falls under two natural and two cultural criteria. In terms of its biodiversity, the site is especially important for plants and birds. It is the principal protected area in the Drakensberg Alpine Centre, a unique floristic region occurring at altitudes above 1,800 m along the eastern escarpment of southern Africa. Within this floristic region 334 of the 2,520 species of flowering plants occur nowhere else in the world. Similarly



The rock-art specimens of this site are regarded by many to be the finest prehistoric rock art in the world.

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Drakensberg is noted for the sort of rugged terrain typified by the dramatic Tugela Gorge.

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Almost 10 per cent of the park's 311 recorded bird species are endemic to South Africa, including three high-altitude specialists, the Drakensberg rockjumper, Drakensbergiskin and yellow-breasted pipit. The park is recognized internationally as an Important Bird Area, with twenty-eight threatened species, including the bearded vulture and wattled crane.

The natural caves and rock shelters of the sandstone cliffs provided the San people with shelter for many thousands of years, and the wealth of their paintings is an enduring legacy of more than 4,000 years of life in this rugged and often inhospitable terrain. The rock paintings are outstanding

in quality and diversity of subject, and in their depiction of animals and human beings. They are regarded by many to be the finest prehistoric rock art in the world, having a high degree of complexity of meaning and including some of the last rock art ever painted.

The San people of the Drakensberg – closely related to the San who still occupy parts of the Kalahari desert in Botswana – were systematically persecuted during the nineteenth century, and driven to extinction in the first decade of the 1900s. Or so it was thought until recently. Now, quite unexpectedly, the changing political dispensation in South Africa and growing interest in

Drakensberg rock art has allowed the re-emergence of the 'secret San' – individual descended directly from the last San inhabitants of the Drakensberg, who manage to escape persecution and live among the Zulu-speaking farmers along the foothills.

Economic change

'The park has provided enormous benefits, environmentally, socially, politically and economically. And although it is not always easy to isolate the contribution of World Heritage status, there is no doubt it has had a major impact', says Yoliswa Ndlovu, general manager of the site. 'It has helped consolidate and enhance our effort



About 13 per cent of the 2,500 flowering plant species in the Drakensberg Alpine Centre are endemic to these mountains



A Basuto herder with his Angora goats on the high Lesotho communal grazing lands, bordering the World Heritage site.

at EKZN Wildlife, and given us all a deep sense of pride in our work. We have been better able to leverage funds and support from other government agencies, and have received invaluable help on a range of issues from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in South Africa.' Furthermore, as Kevan Zunckel, manager of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project (MDTP) points out: 'Local businesses and real estate developers have exploited their proximity to the World Heritage site, and the areas bordering the park have experienced an influx of wealthy residents and "second-home owners", bringing badly needed money into a poor rural community.' And World Heritage status has helped to change peoples' attitudes in even the poorest rural communities, as demonstrated by the people of the upper Mnweni area – the only part of the high Drakensberg escarpment that remains outside the park – who are now developing plans for a community-protected area on their land because they want to benefit from direct association with the World Heritage site.

The people of South Africa derive immense economic benefits from sound management of the uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park. Most important, in a land of scarce

water supplies, is the contribution of water emanating from the Drakensberg and released slowly throughout the year to provide irrigation, replenish dams for urban use, and satisfy the country's growing industrial needs. Tourism is one of South Africa's fastest growing sectors, and the Drakensberg has become a leading destination. There has been a particularly marked increase in the number of foreign visitors to the area, and World Heritage status, with the international awareness it creates, has undoubtedly contributed to this. The economic spin-offs are realized throughout the

communities bordering the park, with local farmers providing guest accommodation and tour operators transporting visitors on day trips to the top of Sani Pass, an exhilarating drive in 4x4 vehicles up a series of hairpin bends through a cleft in the massive basaltic cliffs. The economic benefits derived from the park also include international conservation investments, notably US\$16 million grant made jointly to the governments of South Africa and Lesotho by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) for the five-year Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project, which started in 2001.



The Tugela River plunges off the escarpment at Mont-aux-Sources in Royal Natal National Park



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Community involvement and social benefits

The mountains link the livelihoods of people in South Africa and the Kingdom of Lesotho who depend on the water resources and use of the area for livestock grazing, agriculture and tourism. Until the end of the apartheid era in South Africa international cooperation between the neighbouring states was complicated by fundamental political differences, but the new political dispensation has provided an opportunity for much closer cooperation. A common agenda is emerging to fully develop the Maloti-Drakensberg area for the maximum benefit of all concerned. Under the auspices of the MDTP, conservation site managers, community leaders and local entrepreneurs are able to share experiences and develop a common vision and action plans for the socio-economic development and conservation of the region. Furthermore, a consultative process has been initiated, which should lead to the formal creation of a trans-frontier park linking the Drakensberg with the Sehlabathebe National Park in Lesotho, and will hopefully result in the addition of Sehlabathebe to the World Heritage List at some stage in the future.

The park provides direct employment, not only to its own full-time staff but also to contract workers undertaking specific

labour-intensive management tasks such as operations to eradicate invasive exotic vegetation. Jobs are also created in neighbouring communities providing tourism and related services; while less tangible social benefits are derived from the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes and consultations about integrating the park into the wider local development agenda. 'Stakeholder workshops and community meetings were crucial elements leading to the development of the park's first integrated management plan in 2005', says Yoliswa Ndlovu. 'The benefits of such involvement are difficult to quantify, but undoubtedly very real.'

What does the future hold?

A significant number of challenges remain to consolidate the conservation achievements already made. These fall into three main categories, namely the re-definition of park boundaries, legislation and administrative arrangements; addressing specific park management needs; and alleviating poverty in the rural communities bordering the site.

In addition to the prospect of a trans-frontier park mentioned above, there are areas on both sides of the international border that might be added to the protected area in due course, or at least developed as community-based conservation areas adjacent

to the World Heritage site. And while this consolidation of the 'core conservation estate' is under way, there is a need to revise the legislation and clarify the administrative arrangements to bring the twelve existing units under a clear, common legislative and administrative framework.

At management level, significant issues still need to be fully resolved, including recurring incidents of stock theft in which animals are driven through the park; elimination of invasive exotic vegetation; and improved control of fires that are not part of management's routine burning regime. And there are concerns about the long-term financing of the park's high-quality visitor accommodation and other facilities, which needs to be addressed through a rigorous business plan development.

Perhaps more pressing than any of these issues, however, is the need to develop sustainable rural livelihoods in the areas bordering the World Heritage site, which are some of the most impoverished and environmentally degraded parts of the continent. Unless these challenges are addressed the gains in other aspects of management will achieve nothing.

South Africa is alive with possibilities. No more so than in the Drakensberg. 🌿